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Simultaneous availability of parliamentary documentation in electronic form in the six official languages on the United Nations web site

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted in accordance with paragraph 314 of the report of the Committee for Programme and Coordination on its forty-first session,[1] in which the Committee recommended that the General Assembly request the Secretary-General to submit a report on the simultaneous availability of parliamentary documentation in electronic form in the six official languages on the United Nations web site.

II. Official Document System

2. The Secretariat has been working on the re-engineering of the optical disk system. Substantial progress has been made, and the current status of the new system, which is now called the "Official Document System" (ODS), is summarized in the report of the Secretary-General dated 1 October 2001 (A/56/120/Rev.1). The new ODS is a fully web-based system using industry standard technology, such as Windows 2000, Lotus Notes, Microsoft Internet Information Server and magnetic media. As such, the new system is a strategic tool for the Organization as it would serve as the document repository and inquiry system for United Nations official documents in the six official languages.

3. In its resolution 36/117 B of 10 December 1981, the General Assembly established the rule requiring the simultaneous distribution of official documents in all official languages. This rule, which mandates that no language version of a particular document, including its original language version, is to be released for dissemination until all other required language versions are available for distribution, was reiterated in resolutions 42/207 C of 11 December 1987, 50/11 of 2

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November 1995 and 53/208 B of 18 December 1998. In accordance with the above-mentioned rule, official documents are made available on ODS in all languages simultaneously upon their release in the mandated languages.

4. As outlined in the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General (A/56/120/Rev.1), currently the Office of Central Support Services is working on the development of full multilingual functionality, including search capabilities, as the second phase of the new ODS project, which is scheduled for completion in January 2002. Once that phase is completed, the users of ODS will be able to choose one primary language from the six official languages on the home page of ODS, after which they will be able to search for documents in that language on ODS. Once a document is selected, the user will be able to display the document in any of the six official languages. That is, the ODS will become a fully multilingual system for the six official languages.

5. The current ODS access policy is guided by General Assembly resolution 51/211 F of 15 September 1997 on the pattern of conferences. In that resolution, the General Assembly encouraged the Secretary-General to develop a policy for the further expansion of ODS, including provisions for making it available on a fee-for-service basis to any interested party, on the understanding that access would continue to be provided free of charge to permanent and observer missions and other governmental offices of Member States and to all Secretariat staff members. Pursuant to the resolution, the Secretary-General issued a report entitled "Access to the optical disk system" (A/52/803), in which he formulated the ODS access policy.

III. Posting documents on the United Nations web site

6. The United Nations web site (www.un.org) is freely accessible by the public, and it serves as an invaluable tool for dissemination of information about the various activities of the Organization. While the Department of Public of Information manages the overall information content of the web site, most Departments assume responsibility for presenting and maintaining their own content. The Department of Public Information makes available some parliamentary documents on the web site using ODS as the primary source. The current practice of posting these documents on the United Nations web site is summarized below.

7. The Documentation Centre page on the United Nations web site (www.un.org/documents/) was created in 1998 in response to requests from various user groups, including non-governmental organizations, academia, and the public at large, for greater access to United Nations documents. The Documentation Centre page has become a central location on the United Nations web site for parliamentary documents issued by the main organs of the United Nations. The English language version provides the following coverage:

General Assembly:	All sessional documents for the fifty-fifth and fifty-sixth sessions, resolutions for the thirty-second to the fifty-sixth sessions, and selected documents for the nineteenth to the twenty-seventh special sessions;
Security Council:	Resolutions: 1946-2001, Presidential statements: 1994-2001,

	Letters exchanged between the Secretary-General and the President of the Council: 1997-2001,
	Reports of the Secretary-General: 1994-2001,
	Mission reports: 1992-2001,
	Sanctions Committee resolutions: 1990-2001,
	Reports: 1993-2001,
	Notes by the President of the Council: 1993-2001, and
	Other selected documents as deemed necessary;
Economic and Social Council:	All documents — current year,
	Resolutions: 1982-2001,
	Decisions: 1995-2001, 1994 and selected documents for subsidiary bodies;
Secretariat:	Annual report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization: 1992, 1995-2000.

8. The versions of the United Nations web site in the other five official languages follow the same format and categories of documentation but vary in coverage. Not all years are available for all languages. Additionally, United Nations parliamentary documents are posted as needed for United Nations conferences and events. Users seeking timely information and background research materials have repeatedly requested the posting of current and past documents.

9. The documents posted are selected on the basis of need with respect to a particular topic, requests from a substantive office or the importance of the document, as evidenced by the information activities surrounding release of the document. Most documents are posted in portable document format. Some are converted to Hypertext Mark-up Language (HTML) if the portable document format file size becomes too large.

IV. Proposed solution

10. As described above, ODS is a fully web-based document repository and inquiry system for the official documents of the United Nations in the six official languages which will achieve full multilingual compliance in the six official languages in January 2002, as planned. For the general public, ODS is available as a subscription service, whereas the United Nations web site is free to the public. The United Nations web site contains a wide range of information on the activities of the United Nations, including some parliamentary documents.

11. At present, some parliamentary documents are included in the United Nations web site mainly because ODS is restricted to the pubic. To meet requests from the Member States, non-governmental organizations, academia and the general public, some parliamentary documents were placed on the United Nations web site as an interim measure until ODS becomes freely accessible to the public. Therefore, the

parliamentary documents on the United Nations web site are very limited in coverage and language versions.

12. In order to ensure simultaneous availability of parliamentary documents in the six official languages on the United Nations web site, it would be most practical if ODS were made available free to the public, instead of enhancing the United Nations web site for that purpose since the web site is not designed to serve as the document repository system for the Organization.

13. In addition, the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has already expressed its opinion in paragraph 12 of its report dated 16 October 2001 (A/56/475) that "the Advisory Committee welcomes the progress made in the re-engineering of the optical disk system and encourages the Secretariat to continue to work towards unrestricted and free access to the system for all accredited non-governmental organizations". If the Secretariat is to move forward in line with these concerns and this opinion, the provision of General Assembly resolution 51/211 F on the ODS access policy (see para. 5) would have to be revised.

14. Once the above policy decision is implemented and the ODS infrastructure is proven capable of providing unrestricted access, the United Nations web site could be modified to provide direct hyperlinks to the parliamentary documents on ODS, instead of copying the documents to the United Nations web site, which is the current practice. In this manner, documents seen on the United Nations web site will be available simultaneously in the six official languages.

15. In addition, administrative instruction ST/AI/2001/5 of 22 August 2001 on United Nations Internet publishing, which promulgates guidelines for the presentation of United Nations materials and documents, conditions of use and disclaimers for reproduction of official documents, would need to be amended to require all content-providing offices to remove any versions that may have been posted and instead provide hyperlinks to the actual document on ODS. This will further ensure the accuracy and consistency of the parliamentary documents on the United Nations web site, in relation to the official version of the documents on ODS.

V. Conclusion

16. **The Secretariat will continue to monitor and upgrade the Official Document System so as to ensure sufficient capacity in line with the expected volume emanating from free access to the public. Once ODS is free to the public, the United Nations web site could have the parliamentary documents simultaneously in the six official languages by directly hyperlinking the documents on ODS.**

17. **At this point, however, the degree to which the performance of ODS would be impacted by the implementation of the full multilingual support function, which is expected to become fully operational in January 2002, is unknown. Therefore, after carefully monitoring the impact during 2002, the Secretariat would intend to address the feasibility of free access to ODS towards the end of 2002, at which time options would be presented to the Member States with a**

view to revising the current ODS subscription policy guided by General Assembly resolution 51/211 F (see para. 5), including its financial implications.

Notes

[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-sixth Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/56/16).